



# A PERSPECTIVE ON THE BELIEF SYSTEM OF DIYING KHO: A FESTIVAL OF THE BUGUN TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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## ABSTRACT

Religion has always been an integral part of human existence in this world. Since the early civilisation worship of Gods, Goddess and deities were performed in different forms like trees, stone, sun, moon, hills, mountains, rivers etc. People practiced and followed their own belief system. *Buguns* one of the animist tribe of Arunachal Pradesh has been believer of nature since ages which included different types of offerings in the form of sacrifices. The indigenous belief system are based on that section of people who are strongly knitted together by a kinship and follow the divine spirits, totem structures, supernatural power etc. The primitive religious practices of the tribe have been venerated by oral tradition in the form of folk lore's, narrations of dance and song, mythological stories and expressions by the elderly native people. Arunachal Pradesh inhabited by 26 major tribes and various smaller sub tribes has innumerable oral history which enables to acknowledge the cultural, social and religious structure of a particular tribe. The state is endowed with various religious festivals which are believed to bring prosperity, happiness, togetherness and love in the community.

*DyingKho* is one of the major festivals celebrated by the Buguns. It is commemorated in respect of river God *Dying*. It is celebrated by the people of Singchung village (also known as *Braidua Thap*). The festival is presided for seven days. Each day is marked with the worship of deities by erecting colourful flags known as *Fhuan*. *Phabi* Priest occupies an important position without which the festival is incomplete. Sacrifice is another feature which is termed very auspicious during the occasion.

However unlike the *Monpas* and *Khamptis* of the state Buguns do not have a scripts and this makes the task of reconstructing their history still more difficult. However the tribe is rich in oral folklores which enables in developing and understanding their past occurrences. This paper is an attempt, to build a historical perspective regarding their religious belief system.

**KEYWORDS:** Belief system, Folk culture, Kinship, Totem, Phabi, Dying Kho festival.

## INTRODUCTION:

The sacred belief system has been regarded universal since time immemorial. The humans of early civilizations had developed a certain belief system which was considered supernatural strength. These powers were regarded as supreme. People expressed their lives and its variations through oral sources, like folk lore, myths, stories, legends and so on. Likewise in *Bugun* community absence of idol worship or any construction of temples or shrines are not witnessed. People here believe that universe itself has soul and it has to be pleased by offering sacrifices. These sacrifices were performed following by numerous rituals.

The state of Arunachal Pradesh comprises of 26 major tribe and several lesser known tribes which are segregated in different zones of the state. Even though these tribes have their own ethnic culture which is very distinct in their own way, nevertheless there is some commonness between each tribe. It is the indigenous belief system which provides people with a sense of bonding. The sacred religious practices and the faiths of the tribal's have numerous myths and traditional values associated with them.

The Buguns, one of the indigenous tribe of Arunachal Pradesh was also regarded as one of the least numbered tribe in terms of population residing in West Kameng District. People are settled mainly in the subtropical *Tenga* Valley, *Singchung*, *Jamiri* areas of *Thrizino* circle. Like any other tribe of the state they followed animism. They revered the Sun, Moon, Trees, Mountains, Hills, and Rivers. People also worshiped the unseen malevolent and benevolent deities. There have been various myths and beliefs linked with their religious system. The system empowers them to perform distinct ritual and sacrifices to satisfy these deities on respective occasions.

The state has never witnessed idol worship in the society yet the existence of totemic formation has its importance. Buguns considered *Shiniya* a totem of supernatural monolith structure as their worship area. It is the ritualistic means which people follow in terms of the group kinship. This solemnised order gives a person enormous strength towards his faith. Buguns are very much attached towards their religious belief system. A community however big or small have always stood to protect their oneness and always fought to maintain their identity.<sup>2</sup>

However to manifest their traditional identity the tribe has been applying a black coloured paste known as *Khaji* fabricated from the oil of pine tree mixed with burnt ashes. Both men and women applied it for decorative and beautification purpose on their face and body, with the help of a small bamboo stick different marks and shape of flowers were made on forehead and cheeks of the people. It was also applied over the lips.

However with the coming of modernisation people have discarded applying it as the new economy has brought numerous changes also in the form of maquillage which is in use today. Although presently *Khaji* is applied only on some occasion, festivals, marriage and while performing dance.

From the mythical tales, the traditional lore of Buguns affirms that *Acchin-Phumphulwa* was the creator of all the living creatures on earth. They regarded him as the almighty master of the universe. It was also believed that the Sun *Sherbet* or *shebey* and the Moon *Moi Sunthaumua* was the prominent creator of the humans on the earth and were regarded as the ultimate deity who controlled the natural phenomenon. As Levis-Straus considers tales as the 'miniature myths'. But he was very specific on the question that their relationship was not that of anterior to posterior, of primitive to derive. It is rather a complementary relationship.<sup>3</sup> The tales and myths are however inevitably interconnected within the community. The traditional beliefs have been associated with the myths which people had been following ever since.

Buguns celebrate numerous festivals with great pomp and gaiety. Existence of the tribal's in the sphere would be incomplete without the feature of festival in their life. Nearly most of the festivals and rituals of the tribes have been connected to the agricultural practices.

*Dying kho*, *Kshyat Sowai*, *Mathung Tsabo* and *Pham Kho* are some of the major festivals celebrated by distinct respective communities. The festivals have multifarious traditional and religious values. It enforces the objectives of unity among the people with the feeling of fraternity and brotherhood. This paper emphasises on *Dying kho* festival celebrated by Buguns of Singchung village.

*Dying kho* is one of the major festivals celebrated by the Buguns residing in *Singchung* village (also known as *Braidua Thap* in the past). It was celebrated annually on the third of February and continued for seven days. *Dying kho* meant worshiping river *Dying (Tenga)* by the people. The river has been worshipped since ancestral period for better irrigation, good harvesting and for the affluence of the village people. They devoted to the river deity against draught and flood, and to ensure to safeguard the life of the people. The festival had been associated with these naturalistic girdles.

In *Singchung* village people celebrates the festival in a much organised way. There have been various customary pace attached for the celebration. Preparation starts by selecting an open area *Sram* or *Sraiba* by the priest *Phabi* where all the people gathered together. A temporary ritual hut would be constructed in the *Sram* for the priest to reside until the celebration got completed. The things required in the festivals were *Khuk* (Shield) two, *Junder* (Spears) two, *Fhuan* (Flags), *Chhok* (Load) filled with *Uanh Yun* (Fish) and the other are *phuathun*

(Lao Pani and strong) or ropes which were prepared from grass and special threads found in the area.<sup>4</sup> These were the chief items which were extremely significant for the ritual.

The first day of the celebration is known as *Tsezong*, village people gather in the *Sram* to clean the area, the area is selected by the priest by chanting prayers and performing rituals. According to him it is believed to be the birth place of sky and earth known as *Hamau Nyia Khyo*. Priest starts the day with continue chants of prayer so that to please the deities. The rest of the village people engage themselves in variant works like cooking, dancing, singing and brewing local drinks *Phua*.

On the second day the priest recollects and recites the story of the crocodile and the bird in his rhythmic hymns and chants the process how people came down to earth. A local thread *Sthong yien* made from *Kher Thiyang* a local plant would be tied on the wrist of the people by chanting prayers and by blessing each of them.

In the proceeding day people worshiped the god of wealth *Thudung* for prosperity and good health of all the village people. Priest would keep on reciting the appearance of the Buguns on earth in a rhythmic expression which would proceed till late night.

On the fourth day the priest invokes for the sacrificial goat *Spin Akhung*. In his prayers he traces the birth place of the goat and delivers reason for its offering to the deities. After the prayer completes the entire young male member would clasp a long rope *Stong Shiou* together and move rhythmically along with the ritualistic song sung by the priest.

Following the next day priest with his helpers and members proceeds towards a hill far from the *Sram* along with the goat. *Phabi* would keep on chanting prayers along with the members who would shoot towards the sky, some of them would carry *dao* and keep on shouting to drive away the malevolent spirit *Khriyo* present in the forest.

Subsequently after reaching the destination, the head of the goat would be slaughtered and buried under the soil and rest of the remains were thrown into the forest. The rope which was carried by the men was also lacerate into small pieces and buried near the sacrificed goat. After completing the traditional process all of them moved towards the village forming into four groups. Foremost the priest and his helpers would enter the village.

*Larjong* group were said to be the mediator between god and men. Prior to entering the village they would be welcomed by the women folk *Thootu Amua*. The women were obliged to ask Larjong the success or the failure of the ritual in the nature of singing. Larjongs were allowed to enter only when the women folk were satisfied with their answer by offering feasts and drinks.

Following *Bandong* would enter. The festival has been traditionally attached with a very ethnic culture known as *Bandong* or *Bandang Pho*. *Pho* here meant good life or good fortune especially for women to bear male children. *Bindong* or *Bindang* signified the manhood or in other words a sensual maturity. It was the male organ made of wood which was worshiped by the people. It was believed that if the rituals were followed accordingly women would bore male child.

Finally *Buru* entered the village. They performed dance and song for entertainment in each house. They were the notable entertainer during the entire *Dyinkho* festival. Celebration continued till late night by merry making. Priest now would free himself from the *Sram* as the celebration ends with success.

On the sixth day the village would be entirely in peace with no song, dance and music. Village would remain secured for a day. No person moved out or advances in the area during this day. However if anyone seems violating the rule was punished by levying fines. It was also believed that unfortunate miseries transpire to the person or his family members if not respected the authority of the divine. It was also taken care by the volunteers that untoward incident should be circumvented. Nonetheless there has to be no sign of argument, anger, disputes during the celebration. It was regarded ominous if any incident against the rituals occurred at this time.

On the last day priest pray for the entire village people. After the solemnised ceremony was completed the *phabi* advised that everyone was now free to move in the village. However it was believed to be auspicious to gift cash or kind to the priest and *samis* on this day. Elder people gathered themselves in the *Sram* and discussed about the success of the festival. Following the next day the entire village people would clean the village area to exhibit that the festival had been a success.

However in course of time numerous priests from the village passed away which paved way for the discontinuation of celebrating *Dying kho* which required sacrificial rituals. It has been almost six years Buguns of Singchung village have not celebrated the festival. The processes of celebration made it mandatory to sacrifice animals which was a part of ritual since past. However absence of priest due to death and old age made it inconvenient to continue it. It is believed that the supernatural power of the priest has also been perished with them which the pres-

ent generation could not generate.

However due to the paucity of priest in 1973 people decided to abandon sacrifices which required organised rituals by the relevant priest during *Dying kho* festival. During the year villagers performed all the rituals accordingly however left the unsacrificed goat on the bank of river *Dying kho*. Unfortunately the goat came back to the village and after three days they observed massive accidents and death in the area. It was believed that the river deity was not satisfied and annoyed due to which the incident occurred.

Besides in 2008 *Dying kho* festival was again celebrated afresh abandoning sacrifice. After the structured process of the festival the goat was left far from the village area. Yet despite the success, it was witnessed that the celebration was not complete without a suitable priest and sacrifices.

Since then the people of Singchung village has not celebrated *Dyingkho* festival. Although today they have started celebrating *Mathung Tsabo* instead of the former. *Mathung Tsabo* has been celebrated three times in a year with different denominations and months for better crops, harvesting and welfare of the people.

In the recent past it has been witnessed that there has been subtle influence of Buddhism in the life of the people. Yet Buguns have secured their traditional sacred belief system even today and continue to dwell with them. They have not left their cultural faiths and reverence. They still believe in soul which continues to exist even after death. These souls have been held in reverence and are worshipped and offered sacrifices. The sacrifice performed has been generally for the deities of worldly nature to ensure good harvesting, sound health and to keep away the evil spirits. Their religion, it seems gives them the power to reconcile themselves to the frequent emergencies of life.

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